

Witness Name: Becky Ricketts

Statement No.:1

Exhibits:3

Dated: 15 August 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF BECKY LOUISE RICKETTS

I, Becky Louise Ricketts, will say as follows: -

Please note that, for the following statement, that dates are to the best of my knowledge. With regulations regularly changing and Wales dealing with announcements from both the Welsh and UK Governments, I have only provided dates where I am confident that they are correct. Additionally, access to meeting notes, publications and minutes of meetings are unavailable for the Enquiry, due to them being retained to my now-inaccessible work email address.

Part A – Your career

1. My name is Becky Ricketts, and I am providing this statement as the former NUS Wales President from July 2020 to June 2022. This is a mandatory maximum two-year tenure, under the Education Act 1994. The previous President in 2018-2020 was Robert Simkins, and Orla Tarn elected as my replacement for 2022-2024 in March 2022.
2. Prior to this, I was a Students' Union Officer at Trinity Saint David Students' Union from June 2018 until the start of my tenure with NUS Wales.
3. As President, it was my duty and privilege to represent the views, beliefs and experiences of all post-16 students in Wales, including apprentices, and further and higher education students (approximately 250,000 students at that time). This

role involved critical liaison with officers of the Students' Unions (SUs) in Wales and the National Society of Apprentices. They were a closer link to the experiences of their students within their own institutions, with the chain of representation flowing roughly as follows:

- Students
 - Student representatives (course reps, school reps)
 - Student council
 - Students' Union officers
 - NUS Wales
 - NUS UK
4. NUS Wales is a department within the legal organisation of the National Union of Students (NUS) UK. NUS Wales is politically autonomous. NUS Wales currently represents around 250,000 post-16 students, across Further Education, Higher Education and apprenticeship providers. The only HE institution to not be a member of NUS Wales during my time was Cardiff Metropolitan University.
 5. NUS Wales is one of the smaller Nations offices of NUS UK. During my time as President, NUS Wales had three dedicated employed members of staff
 6. Throughout this document, I use SU officers, student officers and student leaders interchangeably.
 7. Working with student officers was the greatest joy of the role, even though the methods of doing so were not of the norm. Due to ongoing UK-wide restrictions on gathering, the usual face to face residentials, meetings and conferences were of course cancelled, so we moved to a fully online method of meeting. This allowed key relationship building opportunities and networking to take place, whilst still being mindful of the lockdown restrictions we were under.
 8. In my view, and having been an SU officer that attended these events in person between 2018-2020 prior to the pandemic, there was a definitive difference in the relationships forged with some of the officers. It was more challenging to ensure attendance at events and meetings due to them being online, but with in-person residentials etc it was much simpler to secure full attendance.

9. That being said, there was a very strong level of engagement from the SU Officers in Wales at key meetings and discussions, and many (Undeb Bangor, Cardiff SU, Trinity Saint David SU, Swansea SU in particular) were incredibly forthcoming with experiences and guidance to inform responses and publications that NUS Wales/UK were requested to contribute towards.

Part B – NUS Wales’ work during the pandemic

NUS Wales and SU officer contact

10. NUS Wales operated fully within the confines of the Welsh Government guidance at all times during my tenure.
11. Naturally, NUS Wales had to change its operations to fully comply with the UK and Welsh Government restrictions at that time. As alluded to previously, we were unable to conduct any conferences, officer meetings or welcome events in person, instead opting to hold these events fully online as opposed to cancelling them for the affected time.
12. We felt there was still value in organising and holding these events and meetings, although again, attendance and engagement varied between Officers and SUs. We created space, once every two weeks, for officers and their Chief Executives/nominated staffers to come together as a Wales-wide team to share experiences, updates on what other institutions were doing to support students, share Wales and national campaigns, and share good practice.
13. It was also a key opportunity for NUS Wales to share information from Welsh Government meetings with the Education Minister as detailed above, and for SU officers to pose questions and concerns to us for us to share at our next meeting with Welsh Government. It was a primary way of closing the feedback loop, and providing our elected officers with a platform to advocate for their student population.
14. As well as this, we had informal chats that allowed officers to ask questions of the other officers and myself outside of these fortnightly meetings, and provided more

of a support network than a formal communication channel. I ask the reader/s to remember that these were adults, mostly aged between about 20-24, on < £22,000 a year, being asked to support thousands of their students through a situation that was causing mass death across the globe.

15. Social support networks were decimated, many Officers were brand new to the structures of their institutions, and for many it was an incredibly lonely time. These chats were vital not only for me to find out information, but for me to keep in contact with officers who oftentimes required simply a listening ear and for me to check in with their wellbeing.

NUS Wales and relationships with stakeholders

16. There was consistent contact with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW, now renamed as Medr). NUS Wales were a valued stakeholder of HEFCW, with regular meetings and updates from the chair of HEFCW. Rob Humphreys and Cliona O'Neil are two people related to HEFCW that were of great importance and use during my time as NUS Wales President, and whom supported me throughout my tenure to provide guidance and information.
17. However, NUS Wales were only provided associate membership to the Board, meaning that we were not provided equal membership with other Board members, nor voting rights. This provided a challenge when meeting, as it did not feel as though the voice of students was provided an equal footing.
18. Relationships with HEFCW were also managed by a core member of the NUS Wales team, Jeremy Harvey, who provided additional support in this area during my time as President.
19. I had a strong relationship with the other six primary NUS Officers (President, Higher Education, Further Education, Liberation, Scotland, Northern Ireland). As expected, we remained in daily contact via formal and informal methods. Our first meeting in person as a group was not until over a year into our tenure, once restrictions had lifted enough for the seven of us to meet as an Officer team.

20. Prior to this, we had navigated advising students, universities, governments and other stakeholders without having ever met each other face to face. This was one of the biggest challenges of the role and of the pandemic for me personally – knowing that, as a collective, we were guiding the student body of the UK through an unprecedented pandemic, from our own individual bedrooms and house shares, scattered across the country. This was why it was vital for us to be so connected to our SU officers, and why I value the time and details that my officers in Wales and in NUS gave me during this time.

21. NUS Wales had regular contact with key Ministers and staffers within Welsh Government throughout my tenure. During the timeframe outlined in the enquiry, Wales had two Ministers for Education – Kirsty Williams (who resigned in May 2021) and Jeremy Miles (who remained in post until after the end of my tenure).

22. NUS Wales had positive relationships with both throughout my time as NUS Wales President. More details can be found below.

23. Due to delegation of responsibilities, I had little day-to-day connection with the OfS, UK Government, SUs in other nations, or UUK. My primary contact was with Wales-only institutions and organisations.

Planning the closure of institutions

24. NUS Wales began to plan for the closure of institutions prior to my tenure beginning as NUS Wales President, so much of this work will have been done by my predecessor, Rob Simkins. I came into office in July 2020, by which time institutions were already physically closed, and preparations were being made to move all teaching online.

Work of NUS Wales during the COVID-19 pandemic and engagement with the Welsh Government

25. Very early on in my presidency, the office for the Education Minister set up routine weekly calls with myself and key NUS Wales colleagues, for the Education Minister to share information and upcoming plans with NUS Wales, and for NUS Wales to have a platform to share student experiences, ask questions, and

challenge any planned comms or policies that would create issues if implemented as-was.

26. It was a positive and reciprocal space, and allowed me as President to have direct influence into the plans of the Welsh Government on students and learners, to protect them as much as possible during the time. These meetings continued after Kirsty Williams' departure and Jeremy Miles' appointment, though with less regularity.

27. These meetings had possibly some of the greatest influence on the outcomes and experiences of students in Wales during this time, and to this day I am glad that we had the platform to raise the questions we did. It allowed NUS Wales to discuss plans and announcements with SU Officers, and for them to share how these policies may affect students on the ground.

28. It also gave Welsh Government an insight into the possible outcomes of their implementations, and was a prime opportunity for collaboration.

29. I also recall my attendance on a Welsh Government COVID-19 planning group, but the formal name of this group is unknown to me at the time of writing.

Impacts on students of changes made to the delivery of teaching and learning

30. Teaching and learning changed for students almost overnight. Moving from a delivery of, in most cases, fully on-campus education to online and working from home meant significant adjustments needed to be made, far before any institution was functionally ready. At the time of campus closure I was Group President of Trinity Saint David Students' Union. I received near-constant communication from students on the university's plans surrounding COVID-19, with a range of situations and concerns. The primary concern was, before formal campus closure at the end of March 2020, of students wanting to move home to be closer to loved ones, but being concerned about missing final assessments and exams to do so.

31. Once campus closures were announced, many students were concerned that the infrastructure and software of institutions could not support fully online learning at the time. They could not access all of the online resources and equipment, and were worried about not having the tools they needed to complete their final assessments in order to graduate. These were raised with University Councils and Senate, with solutions being found by the 2020-2022 TSDSU officers after my departure. There was an increasing level of anxiety particularly among final-year students, who were concerned with being required to resit assessments or return to university for a final term, which would have significant impact on their post-university employment plans and career opportunities.
32. As NUS Wales President, SU officers reported to me that students often took it upon themselves to liaise with their lecturers and teachers at a local level to find out more about their education pathway. Professional bodies were sometimes slow in advising lecturers and course teachers and providing guidance, which caused anxiety for students and stress for lecturers at being unable to advise their students on what to expect.
33. Due to the developing nature of the pandemic, it was often the case that, once guidance had been issued, in a few short weeks it was updated again and therefore the previous iteration was out of date. This caused additional frustration, and may have contributed to a lack of comprehension of the rule changes.
34. Whilst students are often seen as between 18-21, a growing number of university students are over this age, and many are parents or carers. The additional pressure on these students to manage their education with that of their children was palpable. With primary and secondary schools also learning online, this often meant that parents would have less time for themselves to complete their assignments, either due to the age of the child and requiring supervision, or because the household shared devices. This placed additional stress and anxiety on these students, who were at a disadvantage due to their living situation.
35. The inequality in home learning provision was also of concern, for a number of reasons. It was realised early on that, for many students, there would be instances

of sharing devices such as laptops and tablets with others in their home, due to issues such as cost. Many low-income students were required to share their devices with younger siblings who needed to attend online school, meaning that they were often catching up with work and lectures after they had occurred. This worked on some occasions, but for those courses, lecturers or institutions who had not previously been using lecture capture software or technology, this took time to be set up and administered centrally, and so early on in the pandemic there was an academic disadvantage for these students.

36. Not only this, but for overseas and international students that had moved home, there was a time zone difference between the UK and their home country. Anecdotally, there were students from China, the Bahamas, Australia and more I am aware of that had to adjust themselves immediately to be able to attend online classes that were being delivered in the UK. This had a short and long-term wellbeing impact on these students, some of whom were attending lectures at 2am their home time, to be able to maintain their studies. With attendance still being monitored, there was not the chance for these students to catch up after lectures at a time that suited them better. Conditions of their degree meant that they had to meet an attendance minimum, so were required to attend at all hours to ensure they maintained their minimum attendance to continue and/or graduate.
37. The development of the phased return to campus and in-person learning was ongoing from the beginning of my tenure, and it was clear that this was the main priority for some institutions. It is my view that the phased return to campus came too soon, and actively put students in a difficult position asking them to choose between their education and the health of themselves and their loved ones.
38. In discussions I attended with Welsh Government, university senior leadership and wider partners, the discussion of phased campus return was somewhat divided. NUS Wales remained cautious of an accelerated return to campus learning, and instead advocated for extension of online learning for those whom in-person teaching was not a requirement of their course, and for students to analyse the choices and make the best one for themselves. This would have resulted in fewer students on campus, and a reduced risk of COVID-19 spreading. In our oral evidence provided to the Children, Young People and Education Committee in

November 2020, we advocate for students to have the choice to do what is most suitable for their individual circumstances.

39. However, institutional leadership favoured an accelerated return to campuses, which I believe was at least partly financially motivated, as justification for charging tuition fees for 2021-2022. It was also likely a result of assessment of each course, with some courses requiring elements of on-campus study and work.
40. Welsh Government made the decision to delay in-person teaching in Wales until at least after the Easter break of 2021, after the expectation of a staggered return in January 2021. The decision was taken to offer students certainty that in-person teaching would resume, as the delay in mixing and additional time learning online would decrease the risk of a spike in COVID-19.
41. Liaison also occurred between colleagues of the National Society of Apprentices and NUS Wales, where apprentices were also required to return to workplace providers but students felt uneasy about doing so, particularly in vocations where close contact is required. We provided support to the NSOA for this, but discussions and lobbying was largely in the remit of the NSOA.
42. For disabled students, the return to campus in September 2021 was of particular concern. When universities announced the phased return of in-person lectures, many disabled students and immunocompromised students raised concerns that institutions had not fully prepared learning spaces for the numbers of students that would be frequenting it once more. They raised issues around the inability to socially distance from one another due to limited classroom sizes, inadequate ventilation in older buildings, and for some with hearing impairments, the requirement of face masks made communicating with staff and peers challenging.
43. NUS Wales had regular engagement with the Education Minister following the phased return to campuses, to relay the discussions and experiences of students raised to me by Welsh SU officers. Guidance was regularly updated by the Welsh Government, and changes communicated to SUs and student leaders, with the goal of consistent and coherent messaging for students to keep them safe on campus.

Impacts on students of changes made to accommodation

44. With the announcement of university site closures, this included university-owned halls of residence. We discussed the need for students to, where possible, move to their alternative address (usually their holiday address) in order for them to comply with the current regulations of isolation and lockdown.
45. Accommodation and living situations was an area that I recall changing quite frequently as the severity of the pandemic increased and decreased periodically. It was challenging to find a solution that both suited the new legislation at its strictest, and also allowed for the current living situations of students between March 2020 and the start of the new academic year in September 2020. Restrictions at that time meant that students were advised to continue studying from home after the Christmas break in early 2021, but many institutions utilised academic-year-long contracts, meaning that university and college students who lived in on-campus accommodation were locked in contract until around June 2021.
46. This was an area that was challenging to communicate to students. Their living situations varied so greatly that there were many individual circumstances that were not covered by the blanket guidance, and so a lot of specific questions and guidance was required for the Welsh Government to provide in order to ensure that students were given information accurate to them in order for them to be able to comply.
47. Many student flats have shared facilities such as kitchens and living rooms, and there were discussions as to what constituted a 'household', particularly when the situation arose of flats containing more than six students, but the 'rule of six' being a part of the new restrictions in late 2021. This meant that, in many cases, students could have been breaking the law simply by being assigned housing with individual bedrooms of more than 6.
48. Students were incredibly vocal about this issue. Using student voice and SU officers to make the case to their individual institutions' Board of Directors and the Welsh Government, we were successful in lobbying universities to release

students from their accommodation contracts and refund accommodation costs, with some institutions backdating this to the date of the 'go home' order.

49. However, much less success was had with off-campus private landlords. Despite some institutions' Vice Chancellors heading and signing a letter for SU officers to send to private landlords requesting they support their tenants and provide a refund, many cited their own financial challenges as a reason for not providing refunds. This meant that a great number of students who were privately renting off-campus were paying for rooms and homes that they were unable to live in, causing significant financial distress in many cases. This was raised with Welsh Government, but unfortunately guidance did not mandate refunds from the private rented sector at that time.
50. There were also significant concerns about the quality of the housing that students were living in throughout the pandemic. With students in many cases spending 24 hours a day, seven days a week in their student accommodation, they were constantly exposed to the quality of their housing and their poor living conditions. NUS Wales co-authored a report with Shelter Cymru entitled *Broken Foundations: Fix Student Housing*. The report found that 65% of students felt that their housing had a negative impact on their mental health, and over a third stated that affordability was an issue. (Exhibit BR/01 - [INQ000650375])
51. I also raised the consideration of students who did not have an alternative address to return home to, or whose term-time address was their only address (estranged students, care leavers, international students among others) with Welsh Government. This was positively received, and students were granted permission to remain on campus as their main residence.
52. Isolation and self-containment was a consistent concern. With outbreaks of COVID-19 rapidly occurring, I recall students being able to self-isolate in their bedrooms in student accommodation halls if a COVID-19 outbreak occurred. With respect to international students, discussions were had with Welsh Government to allow international students to self-isolate upon arrival to the UK in their allocated halls rooms, as opposed to quarantine hotels. This was agreed and planned for by institutions.

53. Alongside the National Union of Students UK Vice President Higher Education, Scotland President and Northern Ireland President, I signed a statement advocating for the four UK Nation governments to coordinate their plans for students to return home for the Christmas break. This was done to ensure there was minimal opportunities for COVID to spread through public transport systems, and to ensure that travel arrangements could be aligned with the end of the academic term.

54. Not only this, but it was to urge governments to think about the coordination of their responses around COVID-19. Students are often described as a transient population, who move fairly regularly between two addresses. For a great number of students, this means moving between countries of the UK, between England and Wales or Scotland and Wales, for example. Without coordination between governments to ensure that their restrictions allowed movement into their country at that time, there was a risk that students would be unable to return home during the holidays, as the restrictions between their 'home' country and 'university' country would be incompatible. Jim Dickinson of WonkHE expresses this in an evidence session to the Children, Young People and Education Committee.

Impact on students of changes made to examination and assessment

55. Consistent discussions regarding the methods of examination and assessment were had. Particular challenges arose with courses that required a practical element of the assessment or an assessment that must take place in a particular setting (as is the case with education, medicine or some vocational apprenticeships) where these assessments were unable to go ahead due to the restrictions and lockdown regulations.

56. Feedback from SU officers revealed that different institutions were approaching assessment in different ways, which may have proved advantageous or disadvantageous depending on the decision of the institution. Many students were required to resit a part of their course, or utilise an alternative assessment method not used before by the institution.

57. With A-Level, BTEC, NVQ and degree assessment grades in 2020 and 2021, there was a lot of variance in the classifications awarded by institutions to students, when alternative assessment methods were used.
58. NUS Wales and its member unions called for the creation of a 'no detriment' policy to be introduced. The premise of this was to ensure that, where a student has demonstrated commitment and their level of ability in prior assessments, that any assessments completed during the time of the pandemic would not result in their final grade being below their pre-pandemic average, in order for any final assessments not to affect the overall final grade award.
59. My recollection is that most, if not all, institutions adopted a variation of a 'no detriment' policy, with the discussion often fronted by their SU officers. I am unsure as to the length of time that these were in place, but it is my belief that, without these policies, a far greater number of students would have had their final grades impacted by the pandemic, having an knock-of effect on their future careers and prospects.
60. Many degree courses are graded by an external accreditation body. Students whose course was accredited externally were often unsure if their course was covered by the no-detriment policy, or if any changes were to be implemented due to the speed in which these bodies communicated any alternations. This often left students in the dark about what to expect or what would be required of them to become accredited, where the ability to be assessed in the usual way was not possible. I recall these challenges being raised with Universities Wales, and as this was an issue across the UK I believe this was also raised by NUS UK colleagues with Universities UK. I recall Dentistry being a course where the lack of urgency from the accrediting body resulted in multiple SU Officers raising concerns to me that their students may not be able to receive accreditation. I am unaware as to the changes the accrediting body for this course made.

Impact on students of changes made to mental health and wellbeing

61. There was a very clear understanding from Welsh Government, institutions, governing bodies and others that student wellbeing, mental health and social

opportunities would be significantly affected by the pandemic, and in particular the decision relating to students moving home from their student accommodation.

62. Many students already struggle at university and college – for many it is their first time away from home for an extended period of time, and coupled with additional academic pressure, and living with new people means that student mental health has been a consistent conversation for many years now.
63. During the pandemic, these challenges were hugely exacerbated, and for many their wellbeing took a significant downturn. Students became more lonely, more isolated, more withdrawn, and far less likely to build relationships with lecturers or peers. They were unable to enjoy campus life, or indulge in the wider social and extra-curricular opportunities that a university or college experience usually offers.
64. Not only this, but for many students, low income and student poverty is a significant issue. Students often have to undertake part-time employment at university on top of their full-time studies in order to afford to live away from home and supplement their student finance income, relying often on gig economy or hospitality work. As lockdown was introduced, many of these places closed indefinitely, these employment opportunities were unavailable, which further exacerbated students' mental health and wellbeing.
65. I do recall Wales implementing a self-isolation payment, to support those that are self-isolating and suffering a loss of income as a result. However, recipients must have been on a means tested benefit to be eligible. The vast majority of students do not receive MTB, therefore in order to receive this must apply under discretionary assistance. Whether you were successful and considered in financial hardship was then the discretion of the local council. This added a postcode lottery element to the payment, and could have disincetivised councils with large student populations from paying payments to students. However, I have not formally received any data that shares the number of payments made by each council.
66. There were initiatives created for people to donate unused technology to families to enable home learning, but these were more of a goodwill gesture than a coordinated COVID-19 response.

67. During my tenure, NUS Wales co-authored a report for the Senedd's Cross-Party Group for Universities on a post-16 student mental health strategy [Exhibit BR/02 – INQ000650374], alongside ColegauCymru, Universities Wales and AMOSSHE (The Student Services Organisation) which provided recommendations for the Group including:

- Parity of support – students should be able to access the same support, regardless of where or how they choose to study. This relates heavily to COVID-19, where any student should be able to access free, confidential support for mental health and wellbeing
- The need for student mental health to be underpinned by long-term, sustainable funding – financially supporting student mental health and wellbeing support services should be a priority for institutions and education providers. This will enable stronger student communities, allow institutions to show a commitment to the wellbeing of their students, and ensure that they have the best opportunity for employment or further study after completion.
- We provided oral evidence on student mental health to the joint CPG for Universities and Mental Health in February 2021, alongside colleagues from Universities Wales and ColegauCymru. We were successful in our ask of additional funding for student wellbeing initiatives in July 2020, which was received via a Recovery Fund from the Welsh Government to support institutions through the financial challenges of COVID-19. [Exhibit BR/03 – INQ000650377]

Impact of changes made on students overall

68. The pandemic was unprecedented, and very quickly exposed the country's inability to deal with such catastrophe. The education sector was not unlike the UK Government in its lack of preparedness for such an event, nor in its thought process of those who have additional or special circumstances. As a result students were, in many ways, let down by those institutions – either by the lack of teaching time they received once university buildings closed, the disregard for students' living and home conditions, or the social bonds that new students had yet to build.

69. Whilst the very nature of COVID-19 was unprecedented and unplanned, such institutions who are in receipt of significant sums of money should have plans for such events. Even long unprecedented weather spells could cause university closure for an undetermined length of time, and it was simply unfortunate that it was not this, but a global illness that did so. The pandemic exposed cracks in institutional infrastructure – students were not initially provided with laptops in order to keep up with home learning, NUS Wales and others had to lobby hard for accommodation costs to be returned rightfully, and further education students who were due to begin HE in September 2020 did not step foot on to their campuses until much later than they planned, missing out on the most vital of socialisation opportunities with new coursemates and peers.

70. When comparing my experiences to that of my fellow NUS officers, I believe that the relationships held with Welsh Government, Universities Wales, Colegau Cymru and other primary stakeholders meant we were in a positive place to represent the students of Wales. We were invited to give oral and written evidence to Cross-Party Groups, had regular contact with our key Ministers, were strategic partners and key contributors to a range of documents, and were allowed to challenge decisions and policies. Whilst there are areas that I feel could have been more effective, I believe that, for the most part, most partners were supportive of our position and our role as student representatives.

71. The long-term impact of the pandemic is still not yet realised, even today. However, it is difficult to deny that it will not have had an impact.

Understanding of the nature and implications of the rules and guidance set by governments and/or universities

72. For students, there was often a real challenge in understanding not only the changes in the law and Government regulation, but also institutional policies and, more so, the application of these changes to their individual circumstances.

73. Very quickly, we were tasked with learning and comprehending a new lexicon – ‘firebreak’, ‘blended learning’, ‘R rate’ ‘bubbling’ were suddenly being utilised every day, with the meaning of these also changing frequently. Students and officers

were suddenly being asked to have a thorough and comprehensive understanding of university student charters, policy documents and structures for complaints and queries, of which can be complex and often difficult to locate for the average student.

74. From experience, it is often the assumed role of the Students' Union to communicate policy changes, new service introductions or university announcements to the student body, and this situation was no exception. It is common knowledge that such documents provided by institutions are often written in challenging language, and not presented in a 'student-friendly' way, resulting in the SUs not only being tasked with translating complex documents, but then cascading the messages to the student population.
75. SU officers worked incredibly hard to ensure that key messages were clear, concise and able to be followed, and maintained a transparent and open communication with their student population to ask questions and challenge decisions. Students' Unions were arguably the communication middle man between the institutions and the students, and therefore arguably also, when students were unhappy with a decision or announcement, had to deal with the repercussions.
76. For our students who do not have English or Welsh as a first language, this comprehension may have been even more difficult, owing to the new pandemic-specific language that had become commonplace virtually overnight. SUs and NUS Wales did as much as possible to ensure that the student population was informed of changes or new introductions, which is why our consistent meetings with the SU officers and Chief Executives were so vital.
77. There was also a lot of press and publication of students being key in any 'spikes' that were seen in the number of cases and hospitalisations. Students were used as an easy scapegoat for any unexplained peaks in COVID-19, particularly in more populated areas. I remember being approached more than once by journalists asking for comments on students 'not sticking to the rules' and putting themselves before others and putting people at risk. I wholly believe, to this day, that students were not acting more unreasonably than the general population.

78. NUS Wales often used social media to communicate key messages and changes to the student population, students' unions and stakeholders, and used their influence to widen its reach as much as possible.

Section D - Lessons learned

79. The importance of student voice needs to be recognised and respected. Students' Unions played a pivotal role in working with students, stakeholders, policymakers and government to ensure that the experiences and opinions of their students were at the forefront of decision making at such a crucial time.

80. Proactive engagement by Welsh Government and others with students meant that better decisions were made, students felt more confident in the outcomes and real coproduction occurred, at a time when it mattered. It showed that, despite the pressing challenges, there was real care about the situation facing students across Wales.

81. It was clear from the pandemic that the funding model of higher education providers in Wales is extremely fragile, a situation which I do not believe the sector has fully recovered from. There was an over-reliance on tuition fees to remain financially solvent, a precarious situation that drove decision-making, in some ways at the detriment and potential risk of student safety. However, the SU officers and pastoral and academic staff of the institutions remained in place to provide students with the support they needed at a time of great difficulty. I witnessed lecturers go above and beyond for their students in providing additional support and care, and SU officers at that time (including myself) providing wellbeing support to students at all hours of the day and night. It remains the same that institutions need to rapidly rethink their funding model, and be supported by Welsh Government to do so.

82. The student finance system is not fit for purpose. Students reported increased instances of financial hardship and poverty during the pandemic, when their only source of income became their student loans due to their part-time employment being largely removed overnight as restrictions came into effect. Despite an expansion to institutions; hardship funds and financial support payments, many

students were unaware of their existence or how to apply for them. Anecdotally , when I was a student and utilised my institutions' hardship fund, I was first requested to 'max out' my overdraft before I would be eligible for financial support, which is a deeply misguided approach. Welsh Government should assess the extent to which insufficient student loan payments require students to undertake additional employment to ensure they have the funds to live, and the detriment that this can have on their ability to apply themselves fully to their course and studies. I understand that there are slight differences between Student Finance England and Student Finance Wales, but the often-spoken message of Wales having 'the most generous student loan package of any of the four UK nations' does not mean that it is adequate.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed:

Personal Data

Dated: 15/08/2025